

N.B. This is a very rough draft article, originally written in January 1979, with some later amendments. The quotations and arguments have not been checked, so please use with caution.

Marc Bloch and the transformation to modernity.

(originally written in Jan. 1979)

The other great modern historian is March Bloch. His immense erudition and width of vision have made him very influential. Yet his work is a mixed blessing for those trying to untangle the past history of England. The difficulty seems to be that the very weight of his opinion has helped to promote a general view of the development of west European societies which sometimes distorts the English past. Although he himself was usually cautious and aware of differences, his sweeping survey, particularly in **Feudal Society**, can too easily be held to apply equally to all of Europe. There are, in fact, two different interpretations which could be drawn from his work, and it seems likely that modern historians have tended to select one rather than the other.

One interpretation lends support to the double idea that all the western European nations went through roughly the same stages, with England perhaps a little precocious, but basically similar. The underlying thesis is that once there were group based on kinship ties. These broke down but then consolidated during the period of 'feudalism' into a new type of organization, not based on kinship. Then out of this emerged the conjugal family. We are told that "Early societies were made up of groups rather than individuals. A man on his own counted for very little." (French, 150). The community and the kinship group were central.

At the risk of quoting too much, it is worth seeing how Bloch envisaged the change. The village fields in Europe "were the creation of a large group, perhaps - though is only conjecture - a tribe or clan; the **manse**s must have been the portions assigned - whether from the beginning or only at a later date is impossible to say - to smaller sub-groups, communities within the community. The organism which had the manse as its shell was very probably a family group, smaller than the clan in that it was restricted to members whose descent from a common ancestor was a matter of only a few generations, yet still patriarchal enough to include married couples from several collateral branches. The English 'hide'...is probably descended from an old Germanic word meaning family...the term **manse** signifies an agrarian holding worked by a small family group, probably a family...This progressive disintegration of the primitive agrarian unit, under whatever name, was to some extent a European phenomenon. But in England and Germany the process was far more gradual than in the open countryside of France...." (Rural, pp.158-161).

This leads Bloch on to speculate as to how this change occurred over the whole of Europe, including England. The story he tells is the widely believed one of the gradual "narrowing down" of the family over time. "We know all too little of the history of medieval family. However, it is possible to discern a slow evolution, starting in the early Middle Ages. The kindred, that is to say the group related by blood, was still a powerful factor. But its boundaries were becoming blurred...Prosecution of a vendetta was still expected by public opinion, but there were no precise laws detailing joint responsibility in criminal matters, whether active or passive. There was still plenty of life in the habit of preserving the family holding intact, to be worked in common by fathers and sons, brothers, or even cousins; but it was nothing more than a habit, since individual ownership was fully recognized by law and custom and the only established right enjoyed by the kindred was the privilege of pre-emption when a holding came on the market. This loss of definition at the edges and the sapping of its legal force hastened the disintegration of the kindred as a group." (Rural, 162).

This, argues Bloch, led to a change in the structure of the household. "Where communal life had once been broadly based on the vast patriarchal family, there was now an increasing tendency to concentrate on the conjugal family, a narrower community formed from the descendants of a married couple still living. It is hardly surprising that the fixed territorial framework of the old patriarchal community should have disappeared at the same time." (ibid, 162-3).

Clearly Bloch was thinking of some kind of extended family system, with fixed corporate groups, presumably based on some kind of unilineal (agnatic?) descent. He seems to have believed that this was present over all of Europe and continued until at least the twelfth century. This is rather curious, since he must either not have read, understood, or agreed with Maitland's long passages on Anglo-Saxon kinship and the absence of family groups in a world of cognatic kinship. He even says that the wider kinship groups died out sooner in France, where, "In contrast with England, where a system of taxation based on the hide was in force until well into the twelfth century..." (p.163). These changes, in which the family shrank in importance and size, were not confined to the 'feudal' areas, for in Norway too there was "the dispersal of the primitive patriarchal community..." (p.164). Presumably by 'patriarchal', Bloch meant patrilineal.

What, in fact, Bloch thought he saw throughout Europe was the change from some kind of clan organization, through a middling stage of a smaller joint family of married brothers living together, to the modern conjugal family of husband, wife and young children. This movement, if it occurred, would have immense consequences, for it would mean that the family could no longer act as the basis for wider political structures.

He then proceeded to show how, though France had moved from stage one to stage two earlier than England, certain regions lingered on in the extended family stage right up to the nineteenth century. He comments no further on England, but would presumably have believed that while it moved more slowly from stage one to two, it passed more quickly on to stage three.

By the thirteenth century, speaking of Europe as a whole, Bloch wrote that "We have seen that the familial community had nearly everywhere made the transition from **manse** to simple household" (p.164). But this "simple household" was not what we mean by the modern conjugal family, it was an association which was "also known as **frereches**, meaning an association of brothers. The children continued to live with their parents even after marriage and on their parents' death frequently remained together, sharing 'hearth and home', working and possessing the land in common...Several generations lived together under the same roof...This habit of living in common was so widespread that it became the **as is of mainmorte**, one of the fundamental institutions of French serfdom...Yet although so firmly established, these small collectives contained no element of coercion or immutability." (p.165).

After the 'clan' period, Bloch is envisaging a period of what anthropologists would call joint or stem families. This middling stage then began to fade away at different rates in different parts of France. "In time the habit of communal living also disappeared, slowly, as is the way with habits, and at dates which differed widely according to the region." For example, "Around Paris the practice appears to have virtually died out before the sixteenth century", while "In Berry, Maine and Limousine and in a whole sector of Poitou it was still very much alive on the eve of the Revolution." (p.165) Although Bloch does remark that England, with its legal system of primogeniture was different (p.167), but it would be easy to infer that he thought that England would have gone through the same stages.

The other major outline of the supposed evolution of kinship systems is given in Bloch's **Feudal Society**. At the time of the Germanic invasions "it seems certain that groups of this nature (i.e. "vast **gentes** or clans) had still existed among the Germans." It would appear from this that Bloch believed that agnatic kin groups, based on unilineal descent through the male line existed among the peoples who

conquered the disintegrating Roman Empire. But this principle and these groups rapidly disappeared, for very early on in the feudal period "kinship had acquired or retained a distinctly dual character" (i, 137). This dual or cognatic descent led to a central weakness in the kinship system in relation to political and economic affairs, for there was no bounded group based on blood ties through only one line. "The group was too unstable to serve as the basis of the whole social structure". (i,138). As occurs with ego-centred cognatic descent (see Gluckman) any individual will find that he or she is related to both sides if 'feuds' break out.

Nevertheless, Bloch still tries to portray a middle stage of kinship, both cognatic and hence more fluid, but still based on some kind of joint or stem organization. When alienating land, for instance, it was "considered only prudent...to ask the consent of as many collaterals as possible". (i, 139). (Notice here the word 'prudent' - a far cry from the proper **restraint lignager** which one would find in real descent groups in India or China - Alan). Furthermore, in the country districts, the "communities", "long continued to gather together many individuals under one roof - we hear of as many as fifty in eleventh-century Bavaria and sixty-six in fifteenth-century Normandy." (i,139)

A gradual change towards the isolated nuclear family of modern times started, Bloch believed, "from the thirteenth century onwards", a "sort of contraction was in process. The vast kindreds of not so long before were slowly being replaced by groups more like our small families of today". (i,139) Bloch thought that the change from one system "varied greatly from place to place".

As to the cause of " a change which was pregnant with important consequences", Bloch tentatively suggested the growing power of those alternative institutions which were to replace kinship, politics and economics. He singled out the activities of governmental authorities which limited the sphere of the lawful blood-feud. And he suggested that "the development of trade conduced to the limitation of family impediments to the sale of property" (p.140). Why this should have happened in Europe, but not in other large agrarian civilizations is not entirely clear, though it may have been linked to the idea of the massive disruption caused by the collapse of the Roman Empire. This is suggested by his brief reflections on England. He thought that there was a "premature decay" in England of "the old framework of the kindred", which he suggested was the result of the "rude shock to which England was subjected - Scandinavian inroads and settlement, Norman conquest" (i, 140). Unfortunately he does not specify an exact date. All we know was that in England, as well as elsewhere, "the large kinship groups of earlier ages began to disintegrate in this way". (i, 140)

The argument is complex, however, for there is not a "steady progress towards emancipation of the individual". (i,141). To a certain extent, the feudal period saw a resurgence of kinship ties. "The period which saw the expansion of the relations of personal protection and subordination characteristic of the social conditions we call feudalism was also marked by a real tightening of the ties of kinship. Because the ties were troubled and the public authority weak, the individual gained a more lively awareness of his links with the local groups, whatever they were, to which he could look for help." (i, 142) Thus Bloch is arguing that within feudalism, which he defines elsewhere as a period of the "dissolution of the State", both feudal ties and kinship ties grew in power. (This, of course, is not true of the centralized kind of feudalism in England, AM).

His argument then is that when feudalism began to turn into what others have termed 'bastard feudalism', both feudal ties and kinship ties were weakened. "The centuries which later witnessed the progressive metamorphosis of authentic feudalism also experienced - with the crumbling of the large kinship groups - the early symptoms of the slow decay of family solidarities." (i, 142). Bloch does not make an exception of England here, so we must presume that he believed that with the decline of "feudalism" in that country too, wider kinship ties would fall apart.

Thus we have the following argument. As the Germanic peoples invaded they lost their agnatic kin

group and became cognatic. As feudalism of the "dissolved state" kind spread, there was a temporary and partial strengthening of kin ties. During this middle phase there were kinship groups - but relatively small ones based on parents and married children living together - joint or stem families. As feudalism changed into the various forms that succeeded it, so the middle phase gave way to the nuclear family. It is an appealing story, and may well have some elements of truth. But it is also shot through with difficulties.

There is no evidence presented that the early Germanic peoples really were agnatic. They may have for long been cognatic, before invading the Roman Empire. It is too easily assumed that the powerful kingdoms of England went through the same stages as the splintered and anarchic regions of France. An alternative scheme to the above, at least in relation to England, would be that the people who arrived (Anglo-Saxons) had no trace of agnatic descent. They brought an almost purely cognatic system. The flexibility of this system never solidified into any kind of kinship groupings - the speculations about the 'hide' and 'manses' as kinship based are probably completely wrong. There is no evidence, except possibly among a few very rich families, of any kind of joint or stem family from the earliest records. Thus there was no middle phase to dissolve at the supposed end of feudalism into something else.

What we do get out of Bloch's attempt, however, is the vital insight that it is in the relations between kinship and politics (feudalism) that the secret of European and specifically English peculiarity lies.

The other strand of Bloch's thought was concerned with the differences between England and the Continent. (cf. also his last book, not translated into English, on the French and English manors). It is not surprising that his remarks on this subject have not been fully appreciated since Bloch himself is ambivalent on the subject. One conclusion one can draw from his work is that nearly of Europe went through the same 'stages', that is to say pre-feudal, feudal, post-feudal. There were a few blank spaced on the map of feudalism, the Scandinavian peninsula, Frizia, Ireland (ii,445), but England is not one of them. Like most of central Europe, England passed through a 'feudal' phase.

What exactly, then, was such feudalism? Bloch's most concise definition is as follows. " A subject peasantry; widespread use of the service tenement (i.e. the fief) instead of a salary, which was out of the question; the supremacy of a class of specialized warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man and, within the warrior class, assume the distinctive form called vassalage; fragmentation of authority - leading inevitably to discord; and, in the midst of all this, the survival of other forms of association, family and State, of which the latter, during the second feudal age, was to acquire renewed strength - such then seem to be the fundamental features of European feudalism." (ii,446).

Although Bloch was aware that such a feudalism was not unique to Europe, for "Japan went through this phase" (ii,447), on the surface he seems to lump much of Europe together, including England. Yet there are signs that he also saw a profound difference between England and France, and it is worth exploring whether this was merely a difference in degree or in kind.

Although he appears only to have quoted Maitland directly once (on the absence of **noblesse** in England, Land, 107, 123n), Bloch had absorbed some of the lessons of Maitland. He seems to have been aware that English "feudalism" was very different from that on the Continent from at least the twelfth century. These differences are discussed in various places. We have seen that he talked of the "premature decay of the kindred" in England and that this may have been related to a peculiarity of England, the frankpledge system which was, he thought, pre-Norman and gave added security and hence undermined the political need for wider kin links. (Feudalism, i,271). Both of these features were related to a wider feature, the unusual strength of the central power in England.

One reason, Bloch argued, for the "really profound contrast with France" in the lord's relations with his serfs was that "in this remarkably centralized country" the royal authority could re-capture runaway serfs (i,271). This was because under the influence of the Normans and Angevins, "The judicial powers

of the crown had developed to an extraordinary degree". (ii, 272). In England there was the "creation of a completely original legal system", so that "English feudalism has something of the value of an object-lesson in social organization". (ii,274)

From the words "completely original legal system", we might have concluded that Bloch was aware of an unusual and special phenomenon emerging on this island. Yet he draws back from saying that it was absolutely different, for he was too aware that there were parallels with the Continent. Thus he writes that "despite its distinctive features, the course of development in England presented some obvious analogies with that in the Frankish state..." (ii, 370). Bloch seems to be arguing that for about a century after the Norman Conquest England and parts of the Continent went along the same "path", but towards the end of the twelfth century, in relation to the powers of the seigneur or lord, for example, "It is here that the two paths noticeably diverge. In England from the twelfth century onwards royal justice made itself felt with exceptional force", for "In France the evolution of royal justice lagged a good century behind that of England and followed a totally different course." (French, 126, 128).

It is in the same period, namely the second half of the twelfth century, that another structural difference became visible, namely the peculiar position of the English villein. Bloch points out "How often has English villeinage been treated as the equivalent of the French **servage** in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries...But this is a superficial analogy...Villeinage is in fact a specifically English institution." This was a result of "the very special political circumstances in which it was born", namely that "As early as the second half of the 12th century...the kings of England succeeded in getting the authority of their courts of justice recognized over the whole country." (Land, 58-9). The differences grew wider and wider so that "The French serf of the 14th century and the English serf or villein of the same period belonged to two totally dissimilar classes". (Land, 61-2)

The peculiarity of England was not limited to the lowest class in the society, for, as Stubbs, Freeman, Maitland and others had noted, there was a curious absence of a property nobility at the top as well. When discussing the central feature of Continental feudalism, that is "nobility as a legal class", Bloch found it necessary to write a second on "the exceptional case of England".